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Remember: on the social life of postsocialism: memory, consumption, Germany By Daphne Berdahl and the history of history: a novel of Berlin by Ida Hattemer-Higgins [book reviews]

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Remember

Stephan Feuchtwang

- *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany* **By Daphne Berdahl**
- *The History of History: a Novel of Berlin* **By Ida Hattemer-Higgins**

The imperative to remember is everywhere and it is quite peculiar. It usually involves recalling something not experienced by the person doing the recalling and it is undertaken according to quite different compulsions and motivations. Governments are often involved in impelling such historical recalling through schools, memorials, and other means. It is an imperative to be obeyed, but it can be ignored. The pitiable dead are invoked for memorials, lest we forget them and that is usually what we do. Cultural heritage sites, museums, or books of old photographs all enjoin us not to forget what has gone. They and everything else we are asked to remember as well as what we remember from our own lives are poignantly compelling in the face of the fact that nearly everything and everybody has been and will be forgotten. What we are enjoined to remember are 'markers in the struggle against the furies of disappearance and forgetting' (Assmann 2006: 81).

Whether willingly obeyed or compelled, the command to remember in the case of Germany is a school-bred imperative that often breeds routine learning and then indifference. It involves recalling what has been turned into two irrevocably distanced pasts, those of the Cold War division and the Eastern Republic, the GDR (German Democratic Republic) before unification, and that of the Nazi Third Reich. For Jews it is the Holocaust, carrying a secular command to remember it as an event, as well as the liturgical command to remember God – an important distinction of two kinds of command that run in parallel with each other in Israel (Yerushalmi 1996).

Reading these two books has prompted me to think about the willing obedience of the command to remember and how it involves various kinds of identification with that past. I wonder whether this might be similar to ethnographic empathy, which brings those who would have been ignored and forgotten to a recorded life. To change the terminology from willing obedience and empathy, I might also introduce this review as an appreciation of different ways in which the distanced and perennially threatened past is *animated* by recalling it through lives that are its case studies and compare it to the animation of the strange made familiar and the familiar made strange – which is the *habitus* of anthropological research.



Daphne Berdahl at her untimely death in 2007 was a young and already accomplished anthropologist. In her writings she animates a very recently distanced East German past as well as making the familiar strange and then familiar again to the non-local reader, as all good ethnographers do. Another young woman, Ida Hattemer-Higgins (H-H from now on) animates the past of the Third Reich in Berlin by inventing a character who undertakes the process of animation. Both authors raise fascinating issues about history and personal recalling, whether they can be separated, what the place of emotions are in both. Curiously it is H-H who through another character, a therapist who is also a blind gynaecologist, raises more forcibly the problem of entrapment in the present, how the present of the person, in the mental state into which she has been cast by a deeply painful personal event, recalls and animates the past using it for what might be therapeutic ends by treating the past and its presence in the city of Berlin as a mirror and a screen for self-projection and self-protection. Each book presents a number of textual stratagems for recalling, distancing, animating and commenting, as you will see.

Daphne Berdahl arrived in the East German border security zone to start fieldwork in the village of Kella in December 1990, only a year after the abolition of the border in November 1989. The year 1989 is hailed throughout the world of international affairs as an end-date, the End of the Cold War, making that bipolar world a past whose history could now be written. But as Heonik Kwon has pointed out so persuasively (2010), it is really a year within a long period of what he calls the long 'decomposition of the Cold War'. Daphne Berdahl's ethnography (1999) describes the beginning of that decomposition. Learning how to cope with a socialist dictatorship has given way to learning how to cope with a capitalist democracy and the coping has, according to Berdahl, been through several phases of what she also calls consumer citizenship, the greater choice and freedom to buy. It is being freed to cross the border to reunite with relatives and to use the gifts of Deutschmark given to the easterners at reunification, freed to seek work from employers in the West and Western employers in the East, replacing the failed Eastern manufacturing industry. The east/west border is replaced by Ossie/Wessie categorisation and discrimination. The mutual categorisation is laced with the irony of the dominated, conveyed in jokes such as Wessie piously professing 'We are all one people' and Ossie replying 'So are we'.

The decomposition, as recounted by Berdahl, is experienced through permutations of consumer disadvantage. They start with extraordinary instances of didactic consumerism. She attended three sales meetings to which village women were attracted by representatives giving 'seminars' about products for food storage, cosmetics, and nutritional supplements, pitched as lessons in how to consume and how to succeed by using your body in the new world they were entering. I suppose this is not so extraordinary since we all receive advertising that purports to teach us how to look and be seen and how to present ourselves more assertively. But these sessions struck me as extra blatant. She succeeds here in making the familiar strange, and locating it in a peculiar political circumstance.

But Daphne Berdahl's point was different, that image seminars are instances of a convergence of the consumer with the democratic citizen (2010: 98). She makes her point as a descriptive insight rather than as a critique, writing in the mode of the anthropology of consumption, as if it were the new reality of world economies somehow supplanting production, so that she avoids critique of exploitation and discarded labour even while describing it with great empathy. Perhaps this anthropological economy (as distinct from political economy) is the result of being close to the subjects of ethnography, an unwillingness to set them in an analytical context that is not a refinement of their own self-contextualisation. It is also of course an anthropological mode of theorising, illuminated by the heralds (the Comaroffs and Appadurai) of a new global world of commodities. References to them surround her reflections on consumer citizenship (2010 chapter 6).

What stands out from these surroundings are her wonderfully caustic descriptions of consumer rites in Kella (1999: 170-73 and 2010: chapter 2), sharing her village subjects' combination of humiliation and defiant humour. For instance, the lecturer-saleswoman on nutrition supplements is 'a well-dressed yet sickly looking woman in her midforties with smokers' teeth, bleached-blond hair, and prematurely aged, yellowish skin (apparently the result of years of tanning coupled with a heavy smoking habit)' (1999: 170). Thus she moves closer in to the consumer and then away into anthropological references, illuminating those references with her descriptions. Good writing, good scene-setting, is the stuff of good literature, whether fact or fiction, but here, because of the ethnographic mode of presentation and description, reinforced by anthropological references, it is analytic reportage. It is, in its presentation and by the very words used, a descriptive vignette, not requiring us to follow her into an imagined reconstruction but inducing a reader to see what she saw.

And it is already the stuff of history, the first stages in the decomposition of the cold war seen from a border village. Her ethnography will be (or should as other ethnographies have been) used as more or less primary materials by historians, despite the fact that she is already writing as a historian.

Can history also be personal, for instance when it is on the case study scale, moving from a locality to larger spatial and temporal scales via comparative references? A first answer would have to be that even as a case study it excludes most of the people she knew and met, let alone the others in Kella that she did not come to know well. But for further answers, I turn first to Berdahl's first major ethnography, a study of the Washington Vietnam martyr's memorial (2010: chapter 1, first published 1994). The memorial itself was

the result of a campaign by Vietnam veterans and their supporters, eventually endorsed by central government. Their successful petition was a questioning of the history then being written and pronounced. Further, the memorial contests the unified history celebrated in the other, pumped memorials of the historical formation of the USA in Washington. The memorial that was built unified veterans' perspectives and is therefore much more ambivalent, both for and against the conduct of that war. But are the memorial and its reminiscences, undoubtedly personal, also history? Obviously the memorial commemorates an historical event. But could it not be more, since the letters and objects left at the wall elaborate a contested war? They express and are relieved by being able to express the bitterness and therefore to envisage the healing of the wounds of war by expressing bitterness, bringing together relatives and veterans who felt that heretofore they had been forgotten, or were (as Black soldiers) still marginalised just as they were in the war itself. Some of them have become models for the telling of subsequent stories left there, and for rituals by veterans at the memorial wall and the mobile wall exhibitions and their replicas touring through the states of the USA. As in eulogy and graveyard, personal lives are thus turned into a distinct genre of commemoration. So, the personal messages have become standardised for a rite of commemoration, but are they also a retelling of history?

In the end, Berdahl names them 'historical memory', forms of identity that are personal but also stylised. What is surely remarkable is that these materials of history, or rather alternative histories of the war, are so prolific and inclusive. As such they convey the personal feelings that the histories and their memorial evoke, but not the history itself. The messages and objects are communications of the living with the dead, dead lovers, dead comrades-in-arms, dead sons and daughters, representing a burgeoning wish to be heard that constituted a social movement and created the event of the construction of the memorial as a continuation of that social movement. The event is history, and so is the social movement. Of course the war contained countless stories, lives reduced to statistics, then to brief stories and letters. But the war and even the memorial to its US veterans when turned into events of a history are written as a summary without any more than selective recourse to the poignant and stylised personal honourings of the dead. Even such a historian as Catherine Merridale, whose marvellous account of World War 2 from the point of view of the Russian soldier through innumerable quotations from soldiers' letters, is not so much rewriting the history of the campaigns as conveying their feel from the soldiers' point of view (2005). She is enlivening history with feelings through personal stories. What she has been able to do is create something like a memorial with letters, as Daphne Berdahl does in her essay and as the memorial itself does. Events and their explanations get filled in by these means and by memoirs and reportage, but there is and must remain a separate telling of events and their illustrative case studies of places and some people.

Having noted this distinction, let me turn my attention to the empathy that animates the case study, the finding of personal lives in events and histories, and ethnographies. Most personal is when Daphne Berdahl brings herself into her ethnography. It is an honest story, revealingly of *misidentification* with the local person with whom she formed a close friendship. When she found that this woman friend, a Catholic like all the villagers but more devout than most of them, had become one of the small group of women serving the church and its priest, including his devotion to the Focolare movement that glorifies suffering and piety, Berdahl found herself taken into a common observers' stance with the

priest, a reluctant identification with him through her friendship with the woman even though she was not comfortable with it and thought she had a different view from that of her friend. Then when her woman friend was found to have a tumour on her brain, Berdahl organised expert medical second opinions to the ones locally available just as she had done earlier in trying to save her own mother from cancer, a losing battle despite her mother receiving all the advice. But her friend did not take their advice. Berdahl was angry at what seemed irrational conduct, which distanced her from her friend. But then one Sunday she saw, literally, that 'Her actions and demeanour [conducting her duties during the service] revealed an intensity of faith and purpose that I suddenly almost envied, and at that moment it occurred to me that her deep religious faith – and her devout practice, indeed her embodiment of it – just might be keeping her alive' (2010: 77). The description is interspersed here with published accounts of their fieldwork by other ethnographers, removing the reader to a greater contemplation before moving him back into her personal focus with this last sentence of the section. 'That Sunday after mass, with tears in my eyes and hands trembling, I lit a votive candle for my mother' (2010: 78). From being distanced to then bringing herself to an even closer reidentification with her friend, Berdahl infuses her fieldwork with the release of her own grief for her mother.

Oddly, she did not make of this work, field and grief work, a personalised, internal discovery of the village. Instead she turned herself into a case study of self as constraint upon empathetic knowledge and then of release from that constraint by an experiential opening up to a new knowledge in her capacity as an ethnographer. She makes her self a case study of ethnography as such. Her woman friend is a separate case study, of the larger field of the changing institutions of the Catholic church, from being an institution of local assertion to becoming another state-like institution with which locals find ways of coping. Her friend and her friendship are cases of a Catholic church before or while it became a more remote administrative authority and of Kella's Catholic sense of community as it dispersed into several paths of affiliation and destiny. The separation of herself and of her friend as case studies could be wise, since we can never be sure that the new insight is less fallible than the first, though both were necessary. In any case, in both she is writing history, of the general and changing conditions of Kella and of the current condition of ethnography. In both she provides just a case, not the documentation of the personal lives from which she has selected two for her insights. Both cases do animate their contexts with personal feelings and make them vivid, but they are highly selective, as indeed they must be to illuminate what must be more drily described and analysed.

How different this is from what can be done in fiction is evident when reading Ida Hattemer-Higgins' *The history of history; a novel of Berlin*. An apparently technical enquiry into history (which first drew me to the title) the novel turns H-H's work as a tour guide in Berlin into an unfolding personal occupation of (not just a preoccupation with) the city and its history. H-H did work as a tour guide, and through the fictional tour guide, Margaret, history is duly brought into question, but through another character's pronouncements.

The narrative follows Margaret's routes through Berlin, as she sees it, from a wood (Berlin is a very wooded and green city) through the streets in her own neighbourhood, on the way to her lover – a university teacher of history – in another part of the city, to her gynaecological therapist or to archives of the Nazi past and importantly through the variations she plays on

her tours for tourists to see the recent past in the present buildings and streets of the city. She is so invested in these streets and buildings that they appear to her as flesh and blood, the living being of Berlin and its history. Descriptions of masonry and its various states as flesh and health or wound is a well met challenge of this double fiction. The reality principle, holding the fantasy but not damaging it, enters through episodes spent with her large-headed, almost blind gynaecologist, the questions put to her by tourists, and the actions of her lover that we eventually discover to have been the cause of the personal trauma that has brought about this fantastic waking vision.

Rarely does the reader meet another observer of Margaret. She it is who almost solely, but for her gynaecological and therapeutic checks, bears the reader's view. The vision becomes nightmarishly seductive when giant birds inhabit the living fabric and tempt Margaret into another story, following or being carried off by one hawk-like bird-person, a personification of Magda Goebbels who married Goebbels to be close to Hitler, her first love, and who killed her children and herself in Hitler's bunker rather than live on in a depleted world after defeat in 1945. Margaret also sees other apparitions from the past with whom she can talk, in particular the Jewish family of Regina Strauss, whose own suicidal and child-killing fate under the Nazis has become an obsession with innocence for Margaret to offset her visualisation of Magda Goebbels.

My flat, sparing prose cannot convey the luxuriant prose of H-H that saturates every sentence with the several senses of experience. For instance, at the point when Regina discloses something that shatters all that Margaret had cherished in her recovered past 'She wanted to flee – to flee for the rest of her life. It is impossible to describe how searingly Regina's words burnt into her mind.

Margaret raised her arm to shield her face, but could see the woman was changing. She was darkening, broadening, and seemed covered in fat and fur. A pelt had grown on her. And more than anything now, it was the smell of grasses. A smell of grasses in the body of a fine and splendidly muscled animal. She was taller than Margaret now, far taller – she was filling out into the most dangerously mothering animal of all – she was a brown-black member of the ursine family, a rearing bear, with paws like hands, eyes like pinecones, and mouth sweet and dandy and deadly.

Margaret covered her face.

She heard a low moan. It may have been her own' (pp 275-6).

The image of the bear emerging gradually through the short sentences and through the reversed similes of humanity and non-humanity of a bear ('paws like hands, eyes like pinecones') is peculiarly American, not German ('dandy') appropriately for a German American (Margaret and the author). The splitting of Margaret's image of herself, this time auditory ('the sound of a moan') is the opening of the spaces of the whole book and its theory of ghosts, 'the leftover resonance of a style of being, the intense and prolonged sympathetic vibration, in this world, of a life in the next. Once, caught in the sleeve of time, Margaret split herself in two and released a ghost of herself. The ghost went lost and wondering. But now here it was coming home again' (p. 312).

Solipsistically, and typically of this book, the ghost is the forward and outward projection of the split self from the central character, but it could as well be the animations of projected pasts that she, the character and her author, undertakes from the pasts of the Third Reich.

Through Margaret, H-H is enabled by fiction to inhabit the city of her studies (the blurb describes her as 'a student of literature in Berlin' as well as a tour guide). As tour guide, probably as she says of Margaret, she bought many books and went to many archives. Fiction also enables her to comment on fiction as fantasy and by extension say something about the empathy of participant observation and the animation of a recent past as fantasy that has the power to remind us by its own dynamic of discovery of what we would prefer not to know, what forces us to change our interpretations, what destroys one fantasy and creates another, more suitable one (bird to bear, human maternal ideal to human maternal capacity for defensive and inhuman violence) or just the reminder of the dark ambivalence of hope or innocence.

Margaret's second visit to the gynaeco-therapist bears the title that is also the title of the book: *The History of History*. By this point, a third of the way through Margaret's journeys through Berlin, it is becoming clear and this chapter makes it doubly clear that the book is a journey through the latter part of what is for her, Margaret, a 'lost time' in her life. She is suffering from amnesia and the gynaeco-therapist is her memory doctor. Margaret reports that the buildings have become flesh but otherwise nothing has changed since her last visit, no recalling of memories. In response the memory-doctor makes her a series of propositions of the relation between history and memory. 'You've been reading history so that it will be easier for you to shed your own flesh. That is the history of history – the violence against the body for the sake of the skeleton' (p. 119). Her flesh of memory is discarded onto a history, in order to preserve herself simply as skeleton. 'If you have to see the buildings alive, then it will put a stay of execution on your murder of time' but it is only a stay, before 'the truth of character', Margaret's own sense of guilt returns (p. 120). The guilts of the Nazi era are a screen for the transposition of her own guilt. Or, in reverse, that with which she animates the past is her own guilt, hidden in the lost time of her own much more recent past. 'You can never stop worrying over the shadows of your own riddling heart!' (p. 120). 'The world is pregnant with your own face, and it will never give birth to anything else' (p. 121). On the other hand, finding and telling stories is to find meaning, to play a 'symphony in a cave where nothing but a whimper dwells....If you recognize that fact once and for all, the meaning you will eventually have no choice but to construct will be proportionate. That is to say, it will be very small. You will know it to be essentially provisional, even fraudulent! – and then, as a result, it will be powerless, and remembering all things unbearable will become bearable to you' (p. 123). The punch in that last line is the unbearable not only in the story of her own life but also in the history into which she pours her life. And it will be modest and fraudulent and recognised as such, because it is only an approximation to the truth of the characters of the past, even when much later Regina Strauss (or rather Margaret's researches into Regina Strauss and animation of her character) become as threatening as a mother bear.

This is the equivalent in H-H of Berdahl's shock recognition of her own grief in her recognition of her field friend's therapeutic piety. Still fraudulent, but nearer the truth. And note too the denigration of narrative as mere search for meaning, when the truth is feeling

not story, which in the end is the whimper of a life, a truth so small that its modesty must always be overplayed by the stories we try to tell and that are in all ways preferable to that version of the truth of character at the end of a life, as the memory doctor is toward the end of her's.

Memory work is the compulsion to tell stories against the whimper before death. This contention is quite similar to Jan Assmann's reference during an interview with the sociologist Thomas Macho in which Macho described cultures as islands in the ocean of oblivion (Assmann 2006: 81).

Writing as I am doing and as Berdahl does, foregrounds references. It makes them into confirming or contentious ways out from the authored text, whereas the references in fiction, such as epigraphs and in-text quotes – an example in H-H is a quote from Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf* that she and the reader find to be unexpectedly common and good sense – serve the fiction. References in fiction are, I think, overwhelmed by the story and its characters, whereas in an academic review such as this, or in an ethnography such as Berdahl's, the quotes stand as points of support that can be interpreted in ways that go against the grain of the author's exposition. Argument and exposition are, in this and many other ways, different from fiction not just as genre but in what they expect of a reader.

The contrast is especially clear between H-H's and Berdahl's equally good writing because there is such a dominant fictional character inhabiting H-H's research on and in Berlin, whereas Berdahl's own voice is surrounded by those she quotes from her fieldwork and those she references from her academic sources. But the contrast holds for even the most multi-voiced fiction. Even when many leading characters have interwoven stories, all their voices are those of the fiction. The most dialogic of novelists is Dostoevsky, whose works according to Bakhtin and to Williams (2008) subjected Dostoevsky's theology to an experimental test and an exemplary indeterminateness. But even in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the ultimate exemplar of dialogic fiction, the open-ness of characters and their potential futures are still enclosed in the fact that they are part of a story told as a world for itself.

Fiction can be read as an analogy or an allegory of a world, whereas ethnography claims to be a description, and crucially a provisional description of that world. Even so, the ideas in the fiction, such as the idea that the only truth of a history is to capture a tone and a character, namely a feel and not just through a case study, the rest being just story-telling to seduce us from reality, could be disputed and could, as I am doing, be left as one thought among others, a thought with resonance worth following. It is saying that character and feel of a time past should be an historian's aim, not so much event stories. History in this contention is all animation, not just the occasional blast of animation by personal cases.

Further, despite their differences both fiction and ethnography give us the drama of moments when Berdahl the ethnographic author or H-H's main fictional author of the story finds herself completely upset in what she had settled on as the truth of her key subject in the field of exploration. This doubling back of exploration shakes our, as readers, as well as the authors' acceptance of what she has written. Further, by logical extension, they open the possibility that this new confirmation of the truth, a highly ambivalent and emotive truth, is itself provisional, shakeable by a further experience and dream of self-knowing.

Both are reminders that we are our main instruments of knowledge, and a reader has to insert another self for further knowledge. Both close their accounts by means of the finality of a story or of a life, most tragically Berdahl who herself succumbed to cancer and an early death. We now read her work as both history and memorial. The book I am reviewing is edited by one of her close colleagues Matti Bunzl as a memorial celebration of her life as an ethnographer.

Fiction and ethnography, both, add lives and therefore life to history and theory. Both are personal, and so add the tone and perspectives of their authors to the researched story. But we seldom check the research done for a fiction, though we may doubt or accept its verisimilitude, whereas others in the same 'field' certainly do check ethnography. Both ethnography and fiction are ghost stories, in that they are forward projections of a time past into the present of the authorship and then of the reader. But ethnography, and a review like this one, if less seductive than fiction, are written in so many more registers of commentary and point-arguing that such playing with temporality that fictions such as H-H's does can not only be floated as a device to be considered but also be formally proposed by it. Animation is a backward and forward projection into and from a past into the presents of authorship and then of readership. Historians and ethnographers play this temporal game as an act of recognising and calling into memorability what they recognise.

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